



Library podcast

Megan Asaka Discusses “Seattle From The Margins”

00:00:00 Emily Grayson

Good afternoon and welcome to The Seattle Public Library. My name is Emily Grayson, and I am a librarian in the history, travel and maps unit upstairs. I'd like to thank you all for attending today's program, especially considering the interesting weather we had this morning. And we are really excited to have with us today Megan Asaka, who will be joined in conversation by Naomi Ishisaka from The Seattle Times. I would first like to acknowledge that we are on the unceded ancestral land of the first people of Seattle, the Duwamish people, and honor with gratitude, the land itself and the Duwamish tribe. I encourage all of us to learn more about the Duwamish people, past and present by visiting duwamishtribe.org and realrentduwamish.org, as well as by reading important books such as the one we are here to discuss today. I'd like to thank The Seattle Public Library Foundation, whose support makes events like this possible. I also want to thank Elliott Bay Book Company for being here with us. And they have copies of Megan's book for sale. And we also really appreciate the partnership of The Seattle Times for this event. And finally, we are here today thanks to the University of Washington Press, who are the publisher of "Seattle from the Margins." UW Press is a mission driven, self sustaining publisher and the largest and oldest publisher of scholarly and general interest books in the Pacific Northwest. Today's author, Megan Asaka is an award winning scholar, writer and teacher of Asian American history, urban history and public humanities. She is the author of the new book "Seattle from the Margins: Exclusion, Erasure and the Making of a Pacific Coast City," which examines the erased histories of the communities that built Seattle. She is an assistant professor of history at the University of California, Riverside and lives in Pasadena. In a bit, Megan will be joined by Naomi Ishisaka, who is the assistant managing editor for Diversity Inclusion and the Social Justice columnist for the Seattle Times. She is a journalist and photographer who focuses on racial equity and social justice. So please join me in welcoming Megan Asaka. Thank you.

00:02:28 Megan Asaka

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much, Emily, for that introduction. And thank you all for coming out today. I was very surprised to see two to three inches of snow my sister's house on Beacon Hill. So I really appreciate the effort that you all put into coming in to hear me talk about my book. I also would like to acknowledge Emily Grayson from The Seattle Public Library, who organized the event, to Naomi Ishisaka on The Seattle Times co-sponsor and, of course, the University of Washington Press, which has just been such an amazing supporter of my book. And also to Elliott Bay Books, another really big supporter. And as Emily said, the books will be for sale after the talk. Okay, let's get started. So "Seattle from the Margins" really is exactly what the title implies, which is a

history of Seattle from the perspective of those pushed to the margins of urban society, whose labor helped to build Seattle and indeed, without whom. The city would not have been possible, but who were marginalized historically and then marginalized a second time in the historical memory of the city. So who we as a city recognize and who we don't recognize as part of our shared history. So we know who Henry Yesler is, right? There's buildings named after him. There's streets named after him. We learn about him in school, I should say. I grew up in Seattle, so I know this. Why don't we know the name of others? Frank Kubo, for example, Dorothy Amalguayla and others whose story I feature in the book. People who built the city, who worked, whose labor built the city and yet have really been written out of the dominant story of Seattle history. I am very familiar with the kinds of stories Seattle tells about his past. I grew up here. My family has been here for over 100 years. My great grandfather emigrated from Japan to the Pacific Northwest in the early 20th century, and I've spoken about this in several places already.

But I grew up in Seattle, not feeling like my family's true experiences were really reflected in the dominant story of Seattle history that I was taught and I'm sure some of you here are familiar with, which is that Seattle has historically been a progressive city. That it exists somehow outside of the fraught racial history of other cities. It's a kind of Seattle exceptionalism here. And I sort of absorbed that from a very young age. And yet this never really sat right with me because of my family's experiences being removed from Seattle after Pearl Harbor, possessions taken, incarcerated, and then returning with nothing, right, and forced to start over again and really returning to a city that did not want them back. So for me, growing up in high school and college, I became really interested in understanding this disconnect between what I knew about Seattle history and what I knew so personally about Seattle's history and then what was reflected in the dominant story of Seattle history. And then that drove me, I think, later on, to tell a different kind of Seattle history, one really, that I wished I had growing up, but what began for me as a kind of personal exploration to try to think about how my own personal family history connected to the broader Seattle history and broader Pacific Northwest history. I realized I actually couldn't understand Japanese American history in Seattle without broadening it to include other groups, other Asian American groups, indigenous peoples of the Puget Sound region, who all shared a role in the workforce at the same time and also shared a history of marginalization within the city.

Not to say that all of these forms of marginalization and oppression were the same. They weren't. But I began to see a common thread a common sort of through line that united Asian American, Native American histories together in early Seattle in ways I hadn't ever really seen before in the scholarship, in journalism, or in public history. And so I felt like in order to truly tell and to understand my family's experiences in Seattle, their displacement and marginalization, I actually had to broaden it to include other groups who came together in the workforce, in urban neighborhoods, and who were all similarly pushed to the margins of Seattle society. And so, for those of you who have read my book or familiar with the book, it really is a labor history. So it focuses a lot on migratory workers. And I should say that I never intended starting out the project to tell a labor history. That's never what I thought I was going to do. But as I got into the research process and the writing process, it became so clear to me that all of the nonwhite people who were here during that period were workers. They formed the city's, the first urban and regional labor force. And so I very quickly realized that I couldn't tell the history of

Japanese Americans, of Chinese Americans, of Coast Salish peoples, without also acknowledging their status as workers and engaging with that labor history. And so one theme of the book is tracing the various movements of workers through the city and their lives and labors over time and really trying to examine how migratory workers shaped the city, not only in terms of their labor, but also in terms of the built environment, in the urban landscape itself and the social landscape, and really centering them as a crucial part of Seattle history. So Seattle's economy was based around resource extraction and agriculture, seasonal industries which required mobile workers and migrant workers. And so I trace that history of how they shaped the city during this early period. But another theme of the book traces something related, which is the effort to contain police and eventually displace these workers. And so in telling the history of this multiracial workforce in early Seattle, I found that I also had to talk about the history of segregation. So the book really isn't only a social history tracing the movement of these workers and their interactions with each other over time, but also the sort of pushback, the resistance to these workers, the backlash and the hostility that they faced. While they were necessary to build the economy and to literally build the city, they were the backbone of the workforce. The city did not want them and did not see them as part of Seattle. And this is really where, as I discuss in the book, segregation comes in. So segregation is a really dominant theme in the book that I address, and I kind of unpack.

And again, a lot of this is I didn't anticipate that segregation would be such a big part of the book, but it just kept appearing as I was doing the research, it kept appearing in the sources, it kept appearing in the archives, and it kept appearing in the landscape itself of Seattle's early history. And so what was so interesting to me, as I was finding all of this in the records, was that in the 1850s and 1860s, that there was already a division, a racial divide being formed. And it was kind of I began to see an explanation for why the city had evolved into a North South division right. That I certainly am familiar with and my parents, my dad's generation is also familiar with. Right. And some of you probably are as well, right. The idea that the north is the white part of Seattle, the south is a non white part or the multiracial part of Seattle. And so I began to see the historical roots of how this division came to be. And this was really interesting to me because I felt that this is still the prevailing racial geography in the city today. And what I found in the book, and really what I address in different ways in many of the chapters of the book, is how the city developed around the segregation of its predominantly Asian and indigenous workforce during this very early period. They were needed as workers, but again, they were not accepted as part of the city. In fact, it viewed as troublesome and as problems, not the creators that they actually were. So for myself and I'm sure many others, I came to the topic of segregation, really before I wrote the book, was through redlining.

I think there's, you know, I teach, actually, urban history on the college level, and I think there's a lot more knowledge, public knowledge and understanding about redlining, which I think is great. And this is it's actually really interesting to see that my undergrads know what redlining is, which was not true certainly, when I was in college. So for those of you who might not know what redlining is, it started in the 1930s as part of a federal program coming out of the New Deal to provide financial assistance through federally backed mortgages and home loans, right, to people who were at risk of losing their homes because of the Great Depression. And yet this produced racial segregation because some neighborhoods were deemed acceptable for home loans and others were not. Literally, red lines were

drawn around the neighborhoods deemed to be unacceptable for federal assistance. Hence where the term redlining comes from. And so this produced and reinforced racial segregation in the urban cities in the United States. So what I kept finding in my research, though, was that segregation went far beyond far back, before the 1930s, almost 100 years before the 1930s. And I traced the segregation back to the founding of Seattle, actually in 1853. So as I talk about in the book, racial segregation was not something that appeared in the 1930s right. And imposed by the federal government, but rather was embedded in Seattle's origins. Redlining intensified it and I think formalized it in many ways, but it was in some ways a continuation of preexisting forms of racial division in the landscape that were already there and evolved out of that. So in the time we have left, I want to talk a little bit about how this came to be, this north south division, to give also some examples from the book in which I talk about this.

And this actually is most directly addressed in my first chapter of the book, which is called the sawdust. And so the sawdust was a term actually used by settlers in the 1850s and in the 1860s and referred to the area around Henry Yesler's sawmill, which some of you may be familiar with. It was really the first commercial business in Seattle. It was built in 1853 and was located right on the foot of Yesler way, right where the water meets the land, the tidewater. And so the area was called the sawdust because it was literally built with sawdust. When the mill started operating in 1853, settlers began to dump the sawdust and other refuse from the sawmill into the surrounding marshlands by the waterfront, eventually creating solid ground that was filled with compacted sawdust. This became solid land and, as I talk about in the book, became the site of Seattle's first segregated district. And so I wanted to just read quickly a passage from that first chapter that describes a bit more about the sawdust. The name of the south end district changed many times over the years, but in Seattle's earliest days, it was known as the sawdust.

In 1853, settler Henry Yesler opened a sawmill at the edge of a lagoon. The lagoon frequently spilled over and covered the ground with water and mud, leaving the area nearly impassable by foot for long stretches of time. Yesler, along with other settlers, began to dump sawdust from the mill into the lagoon and surrounding marsh. The sawdust grew so compact that it formed into land, killing off marine life and permanently altering the shoreline. A new commercial and industrial district of bunk houses, shops, and saloons soon emerged on top of this dumping ground. It was here that Seattle's first segregated district came into being. Settlers formed the sawdust as a place to contain the workers they needed to build the town, starting with the Duwamish, the first people of the lands that would become known as Seattle. Settlers relied on the Duwamish for most everything their knowledge of the currents and tides, their familiarity with the thickly forested terrain, and their labor. Duwamish workers powered the sawmill, cooked and cleaned and constructed the first buildings. But their continuing presence and persistence within the city also complicated settler's efforts to claim and occupied Dwamish lands. This tension drove settlers to create a bounded area around the sawdust to segregate the dawamish while still making them available. As labor soon joining the Duwamish with the Chinese, the city's second workforce. Settlers confined Chinese residents to the Sawdust as well, drawing on the same municipal codes and policies they had developed to manage and control Duwamish mobility. Creating the Sawdust was not only about segregating the Duwamish and Chinese workforce, however, for settlers, it was also about cleaning and protecting a space of their

own. A residents district on the northern edge of the city. Located on the high ground, away from the mud and dust, the residence district housed white families and came to embody everything. The Sawdust wasn't homogeneous, stable, permanent. Mill street, later renamed Yesler Way, served as a dividing line that split the city into two distinct and opposing territories. This North South division would continue to structure Seattle's racial geography well into the 20th century, as the city grew unchanged and new workers arrived and unsettled existing hierarchies. And so what we're seeing here and what this passage kind of unpacks are really two things that are driving segregation and driving the creation of the Sawdust. And that first is land, and the second is labor. Settlers wanted indigenous land.

They wanted to establish a city without Native presence, and yet they needed the Duwamish in particular, as well as other Coast Salish peoples, to work. Seattle did not have land based transportation in those days. Everything was connected by water. And the Duwamish were maritime peoples, highly skilled navigators who traversed the region by canoe, so were able to be accessible as a workforce. And so the creation of Seattle's first segregated district was first and foremost about taking the land and establishing the city as a white space for white families and then segregating the Duwamish, whose labors they needed around Yesler's Mill and the district called the Sawdust. Mill street, or what today is called Yesler Way, was that dividing line at the time between the south and the north. And this division was really imposed quite explicitly. And this is what I found in my research, was how explicit it was. So, for example, a removal ordinance was passed as one of the first acts in the newly incorporated Seattle in 1865, which concerned, quote unquote, the removal of Indians. And just to summarize the ordinance, it prohibited Indigenous peoples to reside in any area within the city's official boundaries and push them south around the Sawdust and around the area where yesterday's Mill was located. So it wanted them close enough to be able to access them as labor, but not close enough, but keeping them at a distance away from the residents district. And others followed like this we see in the 1850s and 1860s vagrancy ordinances that were developed specifically to target Indigenous women deeming any quote unquote Indian woman walking around in public in the evening past 09:00 p.m. a vagrant and subject to arrest.

And all of these municipal kind of laws and policies that I discuss in the book were meant to affirm settler's claims to the land and to do so in a way that would make accessible the Indigenous laborers that the city needed for construction, domestic work, laundry service, cooking, navigation, maritime work, fishing and work in the sawmill. And also to reinforce this boundary line, this containment, around the sawdust, around the south end area of what was then the emerging city. The Sawdust is also the same area where the Chinese were forced to reside when they began arriving to Seattle in the 1860s. Chinese migration to the Pacific Northwest was part of a larger global migration of Chinese people out of China that started in the mid 19th century. They began to come to Seattle for work opportunities and they were the second workforce of Seattle. And they were also desirable because Chinese workers, too, traveled by water. Chinese migrants at the time were traveling by steamship across the Pacific and then often landing in Vancouver, BC. And then taking smaller boats down to Seattle and traversing the Salish Sea in marine vessels and moving around that way. So the Chinese became very desirable as workers alongside the Duwamish and other Coast Salish peoples around Puget Sound. And as soon as they began arriving to Seattle Chinese workers found

themselves confined to the Sawdust the same area as the Duwamish often subjected to the very same municipal codes and policies that were devised to punish criminalize and police native people, especially native women vagrancy ordinances. Again, public health laws were often written in ways that allowed the public health department to shut down Chinese businesses. And then when Chinese business owners tried to move into the northern districts into the residents districts above Yesler Way, they were pushed back by white residents objections. Their businesses were shut down and racial violence was deployed against them. And so what we have by the 1860s and 1870s is a city that is actually very segregated already. This is a city that's only one to two decades old, officially at least, and yet has been divided in a way that will have lasting consequences for many other groups of laborers and workers and migrants who are similarly pushed into the sawdust, into the southern part of the city.

And then leaving the northern areas is a white residential space that is policed protected and defended using a variety of means. And this is also why, I think the very early years of Seattle history and why my book focuses on that period why it's so important, I think, to highlight that early period to see how some of these lasting divisions which we continue to see into the present came to be. And so in the book, I trace this north south divide in Seattle over time as new workers begin to arrive and are similarly pushed into the Sawdust in the South End District. One of the stories that I focus on in my fourth chapter are Japanese hotels and the participation of Japanese immigrants in the hotel business. Seattle had one of the highest concentrations of hotel rooms in the country by 1920, in part because of the very transient nature of the urban population. And they were used to house mobile and transient workers who were passing through the city. And Japanese immigrants became very involved in this business. By 1920, they operated one quarter of all the hotels in Seattle, and they did run businesses, hotels in the international district, chinatown, the Panama Hotel is probably the one hotel that people are familiar with, right? It was a topic of, I think, a book by Jamie Ford. And there were others like that, the NP Hotel and other hotels that are still standing today, actually in the ID. But something I talk about in the book, too, is how Japanese immigrants began to operate hotels all over the city. It wasn't just in the international district.

They opened up hotels in Beltown, Capitol Hill, and the downtown business district. So right around where we are now, there was a cluster of Japanese hotels. This was an occupation that for them, was citywide. And yet getting back to that story of segregation, when they began to open hotels in white neighborhoods, that's when we begin to see the pushback from city authorities who started to become suspicious of Japanese businesses in white neighborhoods. And sent the public health department, the fire department, and the building department to harass them, to extract disproportionate fines and fees and to really show that they were watching them. And so Japanese hotels were fine south of Yesler, they were fine in Japan Town, they were fine in Chinatown. But they became a problem in the eyes of the city once they kind of started to move beyond that neighborhood and into the northern areas. And there's so many other examples of this in the book. I talk about poor whites, for example, in this area, and how many were single men who worked as laborers or seasonal workers and were temporarily unemployed. Also found were pushed into the southern area of the city and out of the north because they didn't have families and they weren't conforming to the social ideal at the time of the nuclear family. Filipinos also had a very similar experience when they began arriving

in the 1920s and 1930s. And the fifth chapter of my book features the story of a Filipino worker who arrives in the 1920s and tries to find housing, tries to find a place to eat in the downtown area. So right around here and everywhere he goes, he's told, we don't serve Filipinos. You have to go to Chinatown. You have to go south for that. So this story that I'm telling, this early history of segregation, really, I think, sets the stage then for redlining, for restrictive covenants, other forms of segregation that may be more familiar to us and are more recent, and that became more widespread in the 1930s into the really accelerating in the 1950s. Redlining was one development in the very long history of racial segregation in Seattle.

And I wanted to, in some ways, write the book that would sort of set the stage for redlining. So by the time we get to 1941, people can understand how redlining came to be actually and can connect that more recent history, in some ways more familiar history with the earlier forms of segregation that long predated it and again, that redlining emerged out of. And yet I wanted to end I'm just going to end in a couple of minutes here with a point that, though, I think is very important and I wanted to stress, which is to highlight the vibrant, heterogeneous communities that formed in the South End that formed in the Sawdust as a result of racial segregation. And that's, to me, where Seattle's history is actually so interesting. As a historian, as someone who studies the history of cities, the history of race, is that so many groups were pushed together during this time into the same shared spaces, into the same neighborhoods. They were pushed together through exclusion, through marginalization and yet created something very new and vibrant out of this experience of marginalization. And so my book, I try to achieve this balance between not only telling the history of the forces of power and oppression that kind of were deployed against people, which I think is very important, but not to just leave it there and talk about things that were done to people.

I also try to show the worlds that people created different forms of family life that have also really been neglected in our city's history. And so just to end, I wanted to quote one of my favorite sources that I found during the research for the book, and that was a Japanese writer named Nagai Kafu who came to Seattle in 1903 and lived here for several months. And he wrote about his experiences and what he was seeing to his Japanese audiences back home. And I was able to actually find a translation of his writings. So I'll just read a little bit here. In the fall of 1903, a Japanese writer named a Guy Kafu vividly captured the social world. So he's residing really in kind of where the Sawdust was the South End District. Kafu arrived in the Pacific Northwest to immerse himself in the sights and sounds of the region's emerging cities. An admirer of the literary works of Emil Zola, kafu traveled extensively throughout the United States and France from 1903 to 1907, recording his musings about the gritty realities of urban life for Japanese audiences back home.

He spent considerable time in Seattle, where he resided in the raucous working class district of the city South End. There, each night he observed, quote, crowds of medial laborers who had finished their day's work wandering the district's lantern lit alleys and filling the air with a, "distinct odor of sweat and alcohol from this tangle of narrow streets poured an unending stream of human voices mingled with the sound of gramophones from taverns and shooting galleries and the raucous sound of a circus band." Though he commented on many different topics, Kafu appeared most struck by the heterogeneity that he was seen when he first arrived. He noted, quote, both Oriental and Occidental

laborers frequenting the same cigar shops and fruit stands. Another day, he walked down a single alley and encountered, quote, the haunts of Japanese and Chinese people, caucasian laborers out of work, and blacks suffering from poverty and oppression. Particularly noteworthy to Kafu were the moments that showed Japanese residents integration within the South End and their coexistence with whites and other groups. He recalled hearing the hard, flat sounds of the shamisen next door to a saloon and white children who yelled sukbei, a Japanese vulgarity that roughly translated into lecher or dirty old man, quote.

It had been used by Japanese prostitutes and came to have special meaning, Kafu explained, and now I find the word circulating among the lower class people of America. What he conveyed in these writings was integration in the truest sense, not just people living in the same district and working alongside one another, but also the new forms of social and cultural life that emerged from such proximity. And so what I find so interesting about Kafu's work is that he's highlighting that something very meaningful and beautiful came out of something very ugly, and that is the mixed world that was created among people who were marginalized and whose neighborhoods and districts were deemed to be, quote, unquote expendable slums by the city. What he's talking about is the creation of new urban cultures and new sociabilities among people of very different backgrounds who shared in that same experience of marginalization. And my book tries, in its own way, I think, to highlight the historical value and significance of the sawdust not only how it came to be as a segregated space, but how communities like those living there offer a different kind of Seattle history. Thank you.

00:29:49 Naomi Ishisaka

Thank you so much for this book. I really appreciate reading it and just appreciated the addition to we see that table over there for some of the history that hasn't really been shared or told. And this is such an important addition to that. I just am really grateful for it and the work that you clearly did for really long time to get here. Thank you. In particular, you mentioned this in your remarks, but I think that the piece around labor and economics is so critical to understanding how we got to this point that was really important for me to read. So you kind of talked a little bit about some of the key takeaways that you had from the book, but are there any others that you really if people were just to take away, like, a couple of things from it that you would really want them to know?

00:30:38 Megan Asaka

Yeah, well, really the. First one is what I talked about in the lecture is how early on we start to see the segregation of people. In fact, the city itself started as a segregated space. So I think that's

00:30:55 Megan Asaka

what we have to understand was it's not something that came later. The city itself was created out of racial segregation. It's really part of the very roots and foundation of our city. And so that's one really important point that I and I was surprised to discover that too. And yet when I kept looking at the sources, that's a story that was told. And the second point really is about, I think, historical memory and erasure. So thinking about why we remember certain people in certain communities and why we don't remember others. And what I found as well in my research was really a concerted effort on the part of the city to really demolish and destroy a lot of the neighborhoods that were housing people,

migrant workers and other, quote unquote, undesirable people in the city. And how that was very deliberate. I mean, they set fire to shanty towns and really used slum clearance programs sponsored by the federal government to demolish multiracial neighborhoods before World War I, even before World War II. And so how deliberate that was, that these communities were erased from the landscape. And then, I think, related to that, why we don't remember them today. I think there's a connection there between the actions of the city in trying to demolish these neighborhoods and literally displace people from the landscape, and then their absence, I think, from the historical memory of the city. Yeah. And that speaks to something else I wanted to ask you about, was what were some of the barriers that you experienced in the process of trying to get that primary information when we know that history happened and a lot of these things have been erased?

That was the biggest challenge I had. It was a very, very long research process because the people that I'm interested in highlighting their history, they didn't leave a lot of records behind, and in some ways their communities were demolished in the early forty s. And so it was very, very difficult. And I think that speaks to the limitations of history itself and how historians often root our practice in the archive. And we go to the archives and look through records, and we analyze the records, and we kind of create stories out of those records. And yet the records for me weren't there. So I had to be very creative about where I was even looking for records and what I was considering even to be an archive. So I talk a lot about buildings because I found floor plans, for example, and photographs of buildings to be more common than actually stories of people. So I had to use those records of buildings to then imagine what it was like for people living inside of them and to kind of try to speculate a little bit about what that would have been like, but it was very challenging. And I think, though, that just speaks to their marginalization in the archive as well, and how historians often privilege, I think, the stories of stable, permanent communities because they're leaving records behind and it's easier to trace them throughout time, whereas this group, it's really difficult. And so it was, like, really hard. And I think I drew on my interdisciplinary background and used just a lot of different sources I had to, to piece it together.

But that was definitely the biggest challenge in writing the book. And this is something that comes up in journalism a lot, too, is like, where do you get that? Where is the source of record for things that weren't deemed important enough to have records for? Right, exactly. Yeah. And I should mention, too, I worked at the Densho project for a long time and before I went to grad school. And that was really an affirming experience because I was working there right. In the early days when it first started. And it was like, well, no one's going to be collecting these records. Right. These are records from families. They're found in closets and basements. So we have to do it. We have to create this archive to preserve these materials because no one else is going to do it. Right. And so that kind of got me thinking about the imbalance in the archive and what's there and what's not and whose stories are seen as valuable to save. And so that experience at Densho really hit that home to me, too, that in the process of writing the book, I also had to engage a little bit with the question of the archive itself and whose voices are being preserved and saved and whose records we have accessible. Yeah, I just did a big project related to the Japanese American Incarceration, and I relied heavily on Densho. Right. And if you hadn't done that work with Densho, and Densho hadn't done that work, there would be a huge gap in hearing from people directly about what their experience was. Oh, for sure. And I

think, too, with Densho, that was really groundbreaking at the time was the use of digital technology. And it was a really early adopter of that in the 90s when no one else was doing that. And so that was able to get, I think, the stories out so much easier. And I always incorporate Densho's materials when I teach, I teach a class on the Incarceration. And so that's really important to just the accessibility of the materials. So I'm really glad to hear that you use them. Yeah. And I've had folks from other communities say, like, how can we do something similar? Right? Like they want in the East African community? How can they preserve the stories of their elders who are passing away before it's too late? And there's just so much need for it because they aren't going to have an archive that they can go to. Exactly. Displaced by war and all the different things that have happened. Yes, that's the thing, right. The issue of displacement. Right. And that came up a lot is just the connection between the sort of physical displacement of people and then the kind of erasure of their physical presence in the city. So it's kind of multiple levels of erasure and of forgetting, I think, that my book is really trying to grapple with. But it's also what made it so challenging to write, because it's a lot of piecing together, little tiny little glimpses in the archive that I found, tiny little scraps of information and then trying to make sense of those things together and then trying to tell a bigger story and put it in a bigger picture. So that was really the process of writing the book.

I was wondering, given the Seattle from the margins sort of premise, how did you decide on Asian Americans and Native people as being sort of the locus of the conversation? Well, yeah, again, it kind of happened organically because I really thought I was going to write a story of Japanese American history in Seattle. That was my entry point into the project. And I was recently looking at some of my grad school stuff, and that's kind of where I was focused. And I just kept going back further and further in time, and I kept feeling like there's more to the story. I just felt like I couldn't just leave it at Japanese Americans because I was finding all these stories of interracial families and a lot of mixed Japanese and Asian Native families, mixed race families, and also stories of them being together in the workforce. And these were the groups, I soon realized, that were working in these early industries. They were very overrepresented in the industries that really were very dominant in Seattle in the early days, right, in the late 19th century, early 20th century.

So fishing, the canneries, agriculture, lumber, even the work within the cities, like construction, domestic service, laundries, these were all being done by Native and Asian workers. So the story just led me to that. And then I realized that there was a larger story there about the shared histories, not only in the workforce and the kind of social histories, but then I kept seeing too, like as I talked about and just now these same ordinances that the city devised explicitly to target native peoples, especially native women, then, like, five years later, would be used against the Chinese and then 20 years later be used against the Japanese. So there was like such a shared kind of history, not only of the social history of work and a family life, but also of being targeted in very similar ways, using the same kind of logic by the city. And so much of it was, like, very much around space and like, who can be in what space and when and under what conditions. So I also found similar stories there too, of like, they were being pushed into the south under the sawdust and yet were at times allowed into the northern residence districts as domestic workers, for example, or when they were servants or doing laundry work for families. These cases were like exceptions when they were allowed in, and again, this was the same. So I just found so many parallels between these two groups. And also, I thought,

the connection between the water. That was a very clear connection to me of why these two groups were so dominant in the workforce in these particular industries, was this shared history of navigating by water, of course, a very different connection to the water, I think. But these two groups were very mobile by the water. They were using the maritime waterways of the Salish Sea and the Puget sound to move throughout the region and that made them accessible during an era when there was really no land based transportation.

Even after the railroad came, things were still moving around by the water. It was much easier. And so, yeah, there was all sorts of things. It just became so obvious to me that these two groups really had a shared history that hadn't been highlighted as much as I could tell in many of the history books that I had read in the past. So it kind of happened just very organically through the research process and then linking together these shared experiences around marginalization were just really clear. Yeah, the whole piece around the waterways was just fascinating to me. And then after I read it, I was like, well, that's obvious. But then at the same time, I never thought about it that way in all the years that I've lived here. My whole life, basically. Yeah, and the waterways are really interesting too, because I felt like it also allowed for a kind of autonomy that people had that employers couldn't control them.

So I talk about that a lot in the earlier chapters about how they were able to really kind of move around the region using water and using these waterways. That gave them a lot of autonomy. And it was sort of seen as problematic by the employers because they couldn't really control them. They didn't have a lot of control over when they were coming and going. And so it also interesting history of resistance, of labor resistance and workers resistance too, about they were using the water to kind of follow their own pathways and to create these autonomous communities.

And it really brought people together in ways that were very unpredictable. So people were gathering along the rivers and on the waterfront in Seattle, these fluid environments that was again, very unpredictable and very difficult to control by employers. So it's this kind of balance that we see between employers needing these workers, but also not being able to really control them or when they were coming and going. And so it lends itself to the story, interesting story of resistance, I felt. The photos of that are just so remarkable, I was just blown away by them. That alone is worth getting the book, in my opinion.

00:42:41 Naomi Ishisaka

So you touched on this a little bit, but I was really struck when you were talking about the way in a lot of ways, the sort of system was rigged against immigrants, against people of color. And in particular you talked about the ways that Scandinavian labor was I can't remember the term you use, but it's something like the best. It was like this class of foreigners that was actually a direct quote. Best class of foreigners. Yes. So I just want to talk if you could talk a little bit about that, because I think there's sort of a conventional wisdom that it's only by nature of the time that people arrive that they were treated in various ways or had a certain advantage. And what you're saying in the book is it was much more orchestrated than that. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

00:43:24 Megan Asaka

Yeah, the Scandinavian story was like an interesting one to me because I felt like there hasn't been a lot written about Europeans in the Pacific Northwest. There really hasn't. Compared to other, like New York, for example, Chicago, these cities. I mean, that's the most of what is written about these cities is the European immigrants. They were the backbone of the industrial working class. And what we see in Seattle is such and really the Pacific Northwest, I think the west in general is just such a different story, where Scandinavians were recruited here. They were recruited here by the railroad companies as settlers to become landowners and to become the future of white society in the Pacific Northwest. They weren't coming necessarily the ways they were settling in New York, they were really recruited here. And that's funny.

The best class of foreigners was a direct quote I found by one of the railroad companies that was like, this is why we need the Scandinavians, because they're white people, basically, right? They're white, they're desirable. We want them to be farmers. We want them to be landowners, and they're going to kind of replenish our declining white population. This also took place during a period in which Japanese immigration was really accelerating. So they were seen as this kind of like bulwark against Japanese people coming. I wanted to tell that story, but also to show that they kind of to show that they also kind of came as settlers, and yet many couldn't afford to buy land. And so they ended up working in the same jobs as other people of color, in the lumber industry and the fishing, the maritime industries.

And so they also had a kind of experience that really I think radicalized them in many ways on the ground of being exploited and being part of this exploited workforce. So I wanted to show an example of a group of people who were seen as desirable whites, yet kind of like rejecting that in a way, at least for a time, and engaging in a kind of vision of a multiracial workers movement that was really interesting. And in the end, I think it failed. And it shows to me the power of whiteness to kind of bring Scandinavians out of that radical world and kind of pull them back.

And yet I thought that was an important moment to highlight. But, yes, you're right. I mean, the story of Scandinavians, I wanted to really tease out a little bit because it's not the same as Asian immigrants, for example. And I don't even really use the term immigrant when I talk about Asians in the book because to me, immigrant implies permanent settlement and acceptance in society. So I call them migrants or labor migrants because I think that more accurately captures their status at the time, which they couldn't become citizens, they didn't have a lot of rights, and they were marginalized politically. And so, yeah, I wanted to kind of really tease out that difference, I think.

00:46:19 Naomi Ishisaka

Yeah. Just a reminder to the audience that if you have questions that you want Megan to answer, raise your hand and they'll give you an index card that you can put the question on, and we can get to them in a minute. Just wondering if you could talk about how this sort of history of racial segregation in Seattle sort of manifests today.

00:46:40 Megan Asaka

Yeah, I mean, I think it's helpful to think about racial segregation in different phases. So I think my book talks about the really early phase, which was the origins of the city and segregating the people of color who were also the workforce. And what we see in this era are people being pushed into the same neighborhoods and living in workers housing. They were living in hotels. They were living in lodging houses. They were renting kind of subdivided Victorian mansions. There wasn't a lot of homeownership happening. A lot of people were restricted from that. There was the Alien Land Law. There are restrictive covenants. So I think that's kind of the story I tell. I think redlining is the kind of second era right, of segregation where you see more the federal government becoming much more involved in building single family homes.

And then also that's where you begin to see redlining was really around restricting people of color, specifically African Americans, from buying homes right. And keeping them out of certain neighborhoods. So that was around, to me, kind of like home ownership. And then we have, I think, a more recent sort of phase of segregation in which there's a Fair Housing Act. Redlining is not legal anymore, and yet segregation persists. And I think, to me, it manifests, really in the continuing, first of all, division between north and south. I think that that's still very much the prevailing racial geography in the city, that we see the wealthier north, for example, that's where the more wealth is, less so in the south, the south end of the city. I also think that my book talks about displacement, right? And gentrification being in some ways, it can be seen as, like, the early origins of displacement, marginalization of gentrification, too, and the way that people who don't have a lot of political power and are seen as, quote unquote, undesirable people in the city are pushed out, right? They're pushed out. They're excluded.

And this is a story, too, that you could follow after World War II with the era of urban renewal. And so I think that's also something that my book doesn't explicitly address, but I think I wanted to provide a historical context for understanding the city today and to really put displacement at the forefront of our city's history and to really understand the city itself being created as an act of displacement. That's really what the main takeaway point here, is that the city was created through displacement. It's not a story of people coming in. The city itself was rooted in displacement, and its growth and development required the constant disruption and displacement of people. So I think that that's also a story that we can trace manifests differently a little bit, and it's not the carbon copy story over time, but that's a through line, I think, in Seattle history that continues in the present, for sure.

00:49:52 Naomi Ishisaka

Thank you. Want to ask for audience questions?

00:50:01 Megan Asaka

Thank you. All right.

00:50:03 Naomi Ishisaka

Thank you for these questions. "How different was Seattle's early pattern of segregation from other West Coast cities?"

00:50:12 Megan Asaka

Oh, that's a great question. Yeah, I get this a lot, which is kind of how representative is Seattle? And my answer, which is always frustrating, is it's both similar and different. So what we see in Seattle actually is very similar to cities like Vancouver, for example, has a very similar Vancouver, BC has a very similar history, very similar populations of people, very similar industries. So I would say those two cities share a lot in terms of the history. And actually, I was really inspired by a lot of work that's been written by Canadian scholars on cities, Vancouver and also cities around the Pacific. So Hawaiian cities and cities in Australia, because I think they get at the issue of colonialism a little bit more than the scholarship in the US. Does. I will say that. So I do think that there are similarities there. A lot of west coast cities had very sort of fluid populations, and they were very oriented to Asia. I would say Seattle, though, is a bit different in the sense that it was so tightly connected to the Pacific world in part because of the kind of maritime nature of the Salish Sea and just how the city was geographically kind of organized.

But it was so connected to the Pacific, encompassing not only Asia but also right Coast Salish peoples as well. So I think that's a little bit different in terms of just the kind of maritime geography connection to the Pacific that you see in Seattle and how that kind of allowed for a much more incredibly fluid population and also this mixing of Asian and Indigenous peoples in the city's early history. But there are, I would say, similarities. And something that I wanted to stress with the book is that I felt like Seattle was often neglected in the field of urban history. So urban history, the cities that we think of are New York and Chicago being the important cities, sometimes LA and San Francisco, but never Seattle. Seattle, there's just very little written about the city. And that's because I felt that people were using frameworks that had been developed to study, like New York or Chicago and trying to imply them to Seattle. And that doesn't work because the history is different, the population is different.

And yet I think that looking at Seattle in a different way, kind of maybe more as a Pacific city highlighting Native and Indigenous peoples, people of color history, we can also begin to see dynamics that are true in other cities as well, maybe that scholars have missed, too, in those other cities like New York and Chicago. So I was trying to, on one hand, change the way that we think about rate Seattle history, devising a new framework to do that, and then on the other hand, also then using that maybe as a model to study other cities that may be highlighting being able to highlight new dynamics in other cities histories. But thank you for that question. Incredibly, the other question is the same as the first question. I don't know how that's possible, but that's what happened. Any other questions from the audience? No. Okay. Don't fall down the stairs. Okay.

What might your research teach us about today's crisis of homelessness and housing affordability? That's a great question. Thank you. Yeah. So in some ways, I think what I talk about in my first chapter of the book is really the concept of vagrancy was a concept that was devised by settlers and by the city to criminalize Native people and to establish the city as a white settler space and to render Native peoples as unwelcome outsiders. And so that's what I think in some ways, we're beginning to see the origins of that. Right. I think, too, that, like, in some ways, my book is very much a book about

homelessness and about kind of housing affordability and the city itself being in an exclusionary space. Right. That's what I think the book really talks about, is that we tend to think about the city as like a melting pot, and yet it's not. When we look at the history right. And we look at even this early history, I think really illuminates that the city was explicitly created as an exclusionary space. And so I think that helps then to contextualize the issues around homelessness, housing, affordability right. Sort of present day issues right. That the city is facing and really other cities too, not just Seattle, is to keep in mind that Seattle was created as an exclusionary city for some people, for white people, for white families, and bringing the workforce here to build the city. And when they were done with their work, they were treated as disposable. So that I think is a lesson right for and hopefully can help to deepen the understanding of what's happening today and why history, I think, is really valuable. It's really valuable because I think without even my book goes back to the origins of the city and without that, I think it's hard to understand kind of how we got here. Yeah, but thank you for that question.

00:55:41 Naomi Ishisaka

So this question is about what's not in the book. It says "you discuss exclusion but you exclude black Americans. Even today. Was there no slavery in the Northwest of blacks? And it seems as though you folks behave as white looking people do. We can't unite if you exclude black Americans."

00:56:07 Megan Asaka

Yeah, I think that what my book was doing was trying to focus on particular groups that were dominant in the workforce at particular moments, in the industries that were really important in the Northwest, which were really around resource extraction and agriculture. And the dominant groups in those industries really were indigenous peoples and Asians. And I wanted to kind of then as I talk about in the kind of concluding chapters of the book, black migration to Seattle really accelerates in the after World War II and to kind of connect that later migration to these earlier forms of exclusion that the city was built around to better understand, I think, connect those two experiences together. And so really the book is tracing, I think, the workforce, the kinds of people who are working and were valuable in the workforce at a particular moment and then how that created a particular structure of exclusion and then following that story a little bit through the war years and post war. But thank you for that question.

00:57:34 Naomi Ishisaka

Oh, yeah. She was wondering what I hope for schools can take out of this book and kind of what lessons for students.

00:57:47 Megan Asaka

Yeah, I guess just to think about how history can be relevant, to highlight the diversity, I think of our experiences and how relevant that is and how enriching that is for understanding Seattle history and to kind of have for me. I came to history through family history, but yet I didn't really see that as being real history. So I think I wanted to write a book that I would have liked to read when I was growing up and just the importance of that and the importance of, I think, diversifying who is writing history and what kinds of stories are included, I think would be the lesson. I mean, certainly the kind of historical stuff in the book is important, but I think that would be my message to students.

00:58:49 Naomi Ishisaka

Thank you. I think we're out of time, but thank you so much for your remarks and for being here and for this contribution. As you can see, there's books over there. I'm not sure if they're signed or not. Are they signed?

00:59:02 Megan Asaka

I don't think so.

00:59:03 Naomi Ishisaka

Okay.

00:59:03 Megan Asaka

Yeah. I'm happy to sign them, though.

00:59:05 Naomi Ishisaka

There are books over there and someone who can sign them. Thank you all for your great questions and for being here. It's wonderful to have this conversation. Thank you.

00:59:12 Naomi Ishisaka

Thank you so much.